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ABSTRACT

One hundred and ninety-five subjects, undergraduates who began their college careers in a large state university and subsequently transferred to community colleges, were studied in relation to factors associated with academic performance. A questionnaire was developed based on data obtained from interview sessions with students enrolled at the university and the two-year college and from literature reporting prior research. Results indicated that there appeared to be a positive relationship between institutional environment and academic achievement, although it was difficult for the investigators to discern the more important institutional characteristics relative to academic performance. Factors associated with both academic success and failure are indicated for both the large university and the community college. (Author/MJM)

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The Two-Year and Four-Year Institution: Some Selected Factors Associated with Academic Performance

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The Two-Year and Four-Year Institution:
Some Selected Factors Associated with Academic Performance

The availability of higher education to a growing proportion of the American population has caused enrollment patterns in institutions of higher education to receive increased attention. Indications are that half a million students presently enroll for the first time each fall in public four-year institutions. However, recent studies suggest that only about one half of these students will graduate from the institution they first enter.[1]

There is growing evidence that the persistence rate of drop outs who seek to be readmitted to either their previously attended institution or to some other two-year or four-year institution is steadily increasing.[2] With the expansion of the two-year college movement has come increased documentation of the role of the two-year college in providing another opportunity for the students who leave the senior institutions after experiencing academic difficulties.[3] The concern of those educators who advocate another opportunity for such students is related to the view that two-year colleges must develop various programs designed to salvage valuable human resources.[4] This unique role has been referred to as a "second chance,"[5] "reverse articulation,"[6] the "salvage function,"[7] and the "cooling out function."[8]

Much of the literature has focused on transfer from the senior institution to the two-year college. However, a few studies (Carter and Shultz, and Swain)[9] have examined the final step of the transfer process, that is, the subsequent return of the student to the institution of first enrollment.

A study[10] in Tennessee of this phenomena had a two-fold purpose: (1) to identify those factors associated with the academic performance of students

enrolled in a four-year university and a two-year community college and (2) to determine if students who (a) drop out of a four-year university, (b) entered a two-year community college, and then (c) returned to the same four-year institution improved in academic performance.

Subjects

The 195 subjects (182 males and 13 females) were undergraduates who began their college careers in a large state university and subsequently transferred to community colleges, a particular type of student mobility referred to as the reverse transfer student. At the time of the study, 97 had been readmitted to the university; 98 were still enrolled at the two-year colleges.

Methodology

A questionnaire was developed from data obtained from interview sessions with students enrolled at the university and the two-year college and from literature reporting prior research. Twenty-five declarative statements integrating factors perceived as relating to academic success (or lack of it) were constructed so that each statement described an aspect of the college environment. In a forced choice format, subjects were asked (1) to indicate if the statement were more characteristic of the university or the community college and (2) to assess the relative importance of the institutional characteristics with regard to academic performance. Table I includes 12 of the original 25 statements: five perceived by students as characteristic of the four-year institution and related to poor academic performance and seven perceived as characteristic of the community college and related to satisfactory academic performance. One hundred of the subjects were interviewed to obtain additional information and to provide a validity check. It was recognized that responses from students who leave an institution without experiencing

academic success might be somewhat prejudicial, and comments from students now achieving at a different college may be more benign.

Results

While enrolled at the university for the first time the reverse transfer students achieved a mean grade point average of 1.43 (on a scale of 4.0) for a mean of 52.56 quarter hours attempted. The lack of initial academic success at the university appeared to have resulted from a combination and/or interaction of numerous factors.

Table I(A) identifies characteristics which the subjects felt were endemic of the four-year university related to their lack of academic success. Many academic problems were seemingly related to attitudinal and motivational concerns as well as academic practices found within the classroom. The lack of motivation and the lack of interest in studies may have precluded any chance of academic success at the university. However, the large university setting may have provided little opportunity for some type of individual positive reinforcement. For example, the students listed television teaching, impersonal teachers, large lecture classes, and use of graduate assistants as the most frustrating classroom experiences at the four-year institution. Additionally, the emphasis placed on grades and the competition for grades among the students at the university were named as factors which contributed to lack of academic success.

The majority of reverse transfer students terminated their studies at the university sometime during the freshman (46 percent) and sophomore (43 percent) years. Eleven percent were classified as juniors with grade point averages of less than 2.00. The majority of reverse transfer students (63 percent) had completed four quarters or less before transferring to the community college.

TABLE I

Characteristics of Higher Education Institutions Perceived By Students as Related to Poor Academic Performance or to Satisfactory Academic Performance: Responses to Questionnaire Items Discriminating Between Institutions

	Perceived as Present at: Four Year Institution		Two Year Institution	
Characteristic (Questionnaire item)	N	%	N	%
A. POOR PERFORMANCE				
1. Emphasis on grades cause students to feel great pressure.	177	91	18	9
2. Grades based on test results cause students to feel great pressure.	174	89	21	11
3. Competition for grades is intense.	162	83	33	17
4. Instructional procedures in the classroom are highly structured.	146	75	49	25
5. Faculty have a greater tendency to base grades on memorization of details rather than on ability to integrate and apply concepts or principles.	114	58	81	42
B. SATISFACTORY PERFORMANCE				
1. Faculty are interested in the students as individuals, that is, they exhibit concern for and understanding of the student in and out of the classroom.	18	9	177	91
2. The atmosphere is relaxed and non-threatening.	19	10	176	90
3. Faculty make a sincere effort to establish positive relationships with students.	21	11	174	89
4. Faculty are more interested in teaching than in research and writing.	22	11	173	89
5. Faculty exhibit concern for the different levels of ability in the classroom by adjusting their lectures and assignments accordingly.	32	16	163	84
6. Faculty make instruction relevant and interesting.	59	30	136	70
7. The campus environment is conducive to learning.	68	35	127	65

Forty-six percent (N=68) of the male students indicated that the draft, in some way, had influenced their decision to enroll at the two-year college. The male students in this category who were interviewed stated that they hoped to raise their grade point average at the community college and thus avoid being drafted. Additionally, forty-two students stated that they had voluntarily withdrawn from the university, they were eligible to continue their studies at the university but chose instead to transfer to the community college and hopefully, raise their grade point average. Eleven students related their withdrawal to personal reasons.

Transfer to the community college

The reverse transfer students (N=195) achieved at a satisfactory level at the two-year college (a mean grade point average of 2.56 for 31.10 mean hours attempted). The difference between the university grade point average (1.43) and the community college grade point average (2.56) revealed an improvement in academic achievement of 1.13 or better than one letter grade at the community college.

Table I(B) identifies institutional characteristics which the subjects felt were both characteristic of the community college and related to their satisfactory academic performance.

Community college faculty were seen as interested in students as individuals. The subjects indicated that faculty concern for the different levels of student ability in the classroom and the emphasis placed on critical thinking rather than memorization of details contributed, in part, to improved academic performance. Other positive factors noted were faculty assistance in planning academic programs, quality of classroom instruction at the community college, and the apparent interest on the part of community college faculty

in teaching rather than in research and writing.

Ninety-four percent (N=176) of the subjects stated that the atmosphere at the community college was more relaxed and nonthreatening than at the university, a fact which they indicated contributed to improved academic performance. The students further suggested that the campus environment at the two-year college was more conducive to learning than the environment experienced at the four-year university.

In response to the question, "What were the factors which contributed to your improved academic performance at the community college?", the subjects most often named smaller class size as the primary factor. Smaller classes appeared to be associated with two other factors named as fostering academic success in the community college: (1) teachers seemed to enjoy teaching and (2) establishment of some type of daily study routine. The questionnaire response data are supported by information obtained from interview sessions in which subjects attributed much of their academic success to better outside preparation for class, studying more in general, and daily class attendance. Student desire to be adequately prepared for class seemed to be fostered by the positive faculty-student relationship and the expected opportunity for class participation at the two-year institution.

With respect to improved academic performance, several students indicated that academically it was "easier" at the community college. There was some conjecture among the students and a few inconsistencies in the data regarding this particular point. The majority (N=174) of the reverse transfer students indicated that the students at the university were brighter and more intellectually inclined. Also, as a group, the reverse transfer students reported that it was not too difficult to make good grades at the community college. This suggested

that the level of competition at the two-year college was not as keen as it had been at the university. Supporting this conclusion is the fact that there was a mean grade point average increase of more than one letter grade at the two-year college.

There are other factors which must be considered relative to the idea that it was "easier" at the two-year college. Though the reverse transfer students felt that "easier" was a difficult term to define, invariably, when questioned concerning their use of the term, the students stated that they studied more outside of class, attended classes regularly (class cuts were recorded at the two-year college), and developed a degree of rapport with their various instructors. It should be noted that 316 of the courses attempted at the community college by the students were initially taken at the university. The number of courses failed at the community college was fifteen. Also, indications were that the subjects were motivated by more and different circumstances during their tenure at the two-year college than at the university. When faced with having to leave the university, the subjects had the alternative of enrolling in the two-year college. However, once at the community college, numerous students had to face the realization that this institution probably represented the final step in an unspectacular college career. Many male students were confronted with the threat of being drafted if they were not in college and progressing satisfactorily. Review of the students' readmission files disclosed that many reverse transfer students perceived the two-year college as some type of "academic testing ground." Their improved academic performance at the two-year college was, according to the students, indicative of what they could achieve academically if only they applied themselves.

Thus, through eyes of students who had been in both situations, there were certain factors associated with academic performance at the two institutions. Community college faculty were perceived as being genuinely concerned about the general welfare of students. The rapport which existed between faculty and students was viewed as a positive variable relative to student academic success. Conversely, the lack of opportunity for interaction between faculty and students at the large university, as well as the constant pressure to compete for grades, were viewed negatively by the students.

Return to the university

Ninety-one students returned to the university after three quarters or less at the community college. The students first quarter mean grade point average of returning to the university was 1.70. This represented a small increase (.27) over the mean 1.43 grade point average recorded their first period at the university. However, the mean grade point average for all hours attempted after returning to the university was 1.86. This latter increase suggested that the subjects steadily improved their grades with each quarter's course work.

Factors related to improved academic performance upon return to the university were difficult to identify. Much of the data obtained could be categorized as attitudinal and related, in part, to maturation. In responding to a written query concerning factors related to improved academic achievement, the students stated that they considered themselves more mature and ready to settle down and study. Interview data supported this idea. As students cited less need to "run around and party," "more self-discipline in study," and the desire to "get that degree."

Renewed interest in obtaining a baccalaureate degree and new educational goals were named as contributing factors relative to improved academic performance at the university. Data from both the questionnaire and interview sessions revealed that improved academic achievement was related to the fact that many reverse transfer students were involved in upper division course work. The students indicated that their teachers in upper division courses were more interested in their subject matter as well as the students. Also, the students expressed the feeling that junior and senior level courses were more enjoyable and more closely related to their vocational interests. In reporting that upperclassmen tended to receive significantly higher grades than lower classmen, Keefer suggested that the cause for grade difference might relate to higher interest and motivation, more efficient study habits, and/or a tendency on the part of teachers to give higher grades to upperclassmen.[11]

In responding to the question, "if you were to begin college again, would you choose a ...?", 36 percent (N=67) of the students stated that they would begin college again at the community college; 10 percent (N=18) another four-year institution; and 54 percent (N=100) would again choose the university.

Conclusion

While there appears to be a positive relationship between institutional environment and academic achievement, it has been difficult for investigators to discern the more important institutional characteristics relative to academic performance.

In response to the question regarding the relationship between institutional characteristics and student academic achievement, data reported in this

study suggest that for this group of students there were identifiable factors associated with their academic success in the community college and their lack of academic success at the university. Many of the positive and negative factors mentioned related to seemingly inherent institutional characteristics. For example, a large university attracts many students because of its wide variety of course offerings, special curricula, diverse student body and active social environment. The vast number of students at a large university usually necessitates large lecture classes, television teaching and the use of graduate assistants for freshmen classes and laboratories. In contrast, the two-year college is usually envisioned as a small institution with a rather informal and relaxed atmosphere. There usually are less active social environment and more limited curriculum. Typically, classes are small and more emphasis is placed on classroom teaching than on research, writing and public service. It appeared that the academic performance of the reverse transfer student was related to the individual student and his interaction with these institutional characteristics.

There is evidence that the number of students transferring from the four-year institution to the two-year college is increasing. It seems that students who have experienced academic difficulties at one higher education institution can profit from enrolling at another type institution.

Recommendations

Increasingly, research findings are substantiating the relationships between positive faculty-student relations and academic achievement. It seems implicit that means for more effective two-year communication between faculty and students need to be developed and continually improved. In

an attempt to personalize the learning situation, freshman students should be placed in smaller classes, or if larger lecture sections are required, the student should have the opportunity to interact with the lecturing professor. University faculty and administrative personnel must accord quality teaching an equal status with research and writing in the reward structure.

With the expansion of the two-year college movement, there comes increased documentation of the role of the two-year college in providing another opportunity for the students who leave the senior institutions after experiencing academic difficulties. To facilitate student access to institutions of higher learning, admission criteria at the two-year college should continue to be flexible so as to allow a degree of mobility among college students.

Finally, the emphasis placed on grades, grades based on test results, and the competition among students were factors shown to be related to lack of academic achievement. There is a need to develop alternatives to the present grading system and methods of evaluation, such as granting credit for employment, for volunteer activities, and for varied kinds of activities on and off campus which are linked to academic studies.

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